

THE ACTION FILM

English 199, Spring 1998

12-1:50 p.m., 204 Chapman

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Office Hours: Mondays 8:30-11:30; Wednesdays 8:30-9:30

THE RATIONALE FOR THE COURSE:

Frequently scorned from the position of elitism, the action film is one of the most characteristic and popular Hollywood genres of the past thirty years. It is a staple of Hollywood and other national cinemas, such as those of Hong Kong and India. The action film's appeal is based in kinesthetic (bodily) acting styles, spectacle in art design, and special effects.

The action film is highly marketable. It has become well known in Hollywood as the best model for "high concept" cinema--a film intended to be a summer blockbuster, like INDEPENDENCE DAY, is a prime example of a high concept film. High concept films are those which have a striking, rather simple narrative and a bankable star; these two factors make the film desirably marketable from its initial script stage on. When an agent can pitch both a vivid, simple storyline and the star for whom the story is written, that is known as a high concept film, that is, a very salable film.

The action film has been neglected in film studies. Spectacular action remains to be analyzed by film scholars. We will study the action genre in terms of its dramatic construction, visual and audio style, the psychological and aesthetic appeal to audiences of muscular action and visual/audio spectacle, and social issues of class, race, and gender representation.

PROCEDURE:

We will see one film a week, often having to carry over the end to the next class period. I will talk over the films, since the course goal is not entertainment but to study the dramatic and cinematic construction of these works. Students will write two short papers, work in groups to shape a presentation on a theme to the class, and take a short answer final exam over the readings, class discussions, and films seen in class. Students will also hand in research notes on their individual work for the panel, so that they can receive an individual as well as a group grade for the class presentation. The two short papers are each worth 20% of the final grade. The panel discussion receives a group grade, worth 10% of the final grade; the research notes are worth 20% of the final grade and the grades here are assigned to students on an individual, not group, basis. The final exam counts for 30% of the final grade. Students may revise the first paper for a higher grade after consulting with the GTF, Mark Gallagher.

Students who miss the screenings are responsible for seeing the films on their own. These films will be covered on the final exam.

There are two books for the course in the UO Bookstore: HIGH CONCEPT by Justin Wyatt, and SPECTACULAR BODIES by Yvonne Tasker. A packet of readings will be placed on reserve next week.

WEEKLY SCHEDULE:

1. 3/30. FIRST BLOOD.

4/1. Themes: kinesthesia, class issues in the plot, spectacle and locale, the U.S. government as enemy or inept, early men in motion like Fairbanks. Clips from THE BLACK PIRATE, etc. Ironic recasting in Minelli's THE PIRATE.

Reading: Over first three weeks, class will read HIGH CONCEPT by Justin Wyatt. This week, read Wyatt, pp. 1-64, for April 1.

2. 4/6. INDIANA JONES AND THE TEMPLE OF DOOM [Mark Gallagher to show film].

4/8. Themes: imperialism and race in action films, plus more on the themes developed before. Editing and choreography.

Readings: Wyatt, pp. 65-154.

3. 4/13. G. I. JANE.

4/16. Themes: gender contrasts, more on race and imperialism, construction of villainy--often government officials; the use of the body in male and female action films. Begin discussion of violence. Rape threat scene.

Readings: Wyatt, pp. 155-202. Group presentations.

4. 4/20. THE KILLERS.

4/22. John Woo and Hong Kong cinema. Themes: homosociality; choreography; editing, Woo's career.

Readings on reserve to be assigned on Hong Kong cinema.

5. 4/27. First paper due, along with shot list. Show FACE OFF.

4/29. Finish film. Themes: violence, acting. Group presentations.

6. 5/4. SUPERCOP.

5/6. Jackie Chan. Some themes: choreography vs. stunt people; humor in Chan's persona.

Readings on reserve to be assigned. Group presentations.

7. 5/11. BLUE STEEL.

5/13. Themes: cops, women in action films and shift of themes, rape in film.

Readings: Start reading in Yvonne Tasker's SPECTACULAR BODIES, through week 10. For 5/13, read pp. 153-166, 1-34. Group presentations.

8. 5/18-20. TIME COP.

Themes: male melodrama, and how it is different from women-centered melodrama; sci-fi and action combined; use of blue screen and computer graphics.

You will hand in a typed, annotated bibliography on the research you did or a journal of the work/reading you did for your group's presentation. A handout will explain how to do the bibliography or journal and what you should include in it.

9. 5/25. LA FEMME NIKITA.

5/27. Themes: varieties of audience response; sex in action films; sadistic elements in action films; government as threatening, paranoia about government.

Reading: Tasker, pp. 54-72, 132-152, 91-108. Group presentations.

10. 6/1. Second five page paper due, with theme on gender issues. Show THE GAUNTLET.

6/3. Themes: Eastwood and iconography of male action star. Hand out review sheet for final exam.

Reading: Tasker, pp. 73-90, 109-131. Group presentations.

Monday, 6/8. Short answer final exam in class.

GROUP THEMES:

Here are a list of the groups and the themes they will be organized around. There can be up to eight people in each group. I will pass around a sign-up sheet in class. Once your group has formed, get each other's names and phone numbers and email addresses, and give your group an unique name.

1. MISE-EN-SCENE GROUP: This group will consider such stylistic elements as sets, locations, spectacle, geography, lighting, the choreography of fight scenes, the use of vehicles such as cars or planes as plot elements, use of color, shot compositions, lighting, nonverbal and visual communication.

2. FILM NARRATIVE GROUP: This group will discuss how the film narrative is constructed from scripting through editing, noting how tension and suspense are created, how chase and fight scenes are edited, how music and ambient sound is used, and how a high concept narrative style is developed.

3. RACE AND FOREIGN COUNTRIES GROUP: This group will look at black action heroes; use of actors of color as sidekicks, buddies, or partner of the hero; use of foreign villains or villains of color. You will also consider the body types, casting, and costumes of actors of color in the action film.

4. REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN GROUP: This group will consider women action heroes and how plot emphases shift when the hero is a woman. It will also look at women as supporting actors in these film, and consider the body types, costume, casting, and range of actions allotted to women in these film. From a social perspective, the group will consider issues such as beauty, or rape and attacks on women in these films.

5. STYLES OF MASCULINITY GROUP: This group will consider the male star persona. Group participants can focus on a single star or director, looking at his career and star image. Some possible figures include Clint Eastwood, Jackie Chan, John Woo, Wesley Snipes, Bruce Lee, Charles Bronson, Steven Segal, Bruce Willis, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Sylvester Stallone.

6. SCIENCE-FICTION ACTION FILMS: This group will consider sets, locations, and geography; the representations in the film of technology; special effects and computer graphics; the visual manipulation of perspective and spatial dimensions; gender issues; sci-fi and the creation of new mythologies. The group may want to place a special emphasis on the ALIEN/S films.

7. AUDIENCE RESPONSE GROUP: This group may want to do interviews, or hold group screenings with others, followed by discussions. It may also explore alt. newsgroups or fan clubs on the internet, or look at industry web sites via WWW. It can explore how film critics have responded to the films. It can explore the relation between visual style and audience identification, particularly in terms of how connotations are communicated through visual style, and how individuals vary in their interpretations of those visual connotations.

8. ART OF COMBAT GROUP: This group will explore the cinematic representation of war, martial arts, and weaponry. It can look at plots to see their emphasis on strategy and cleverness in outwitting an opponent. It will discuss how courage is presented, and how these films use combat to implicitly make a comment on gender, especially on masculinity.

9. SOCIAL ISSUES GROUP: This group will consider the representation in action film of the government, of science, of the police, and of the inner city. It will consider the films' social effect vs. the films' use as entertainment. It will take up the issue of violence in the cinema.

The groups can have no more than eight people per group, and no fewer than two. I will assign the day on which the group will give its presentation to the class.